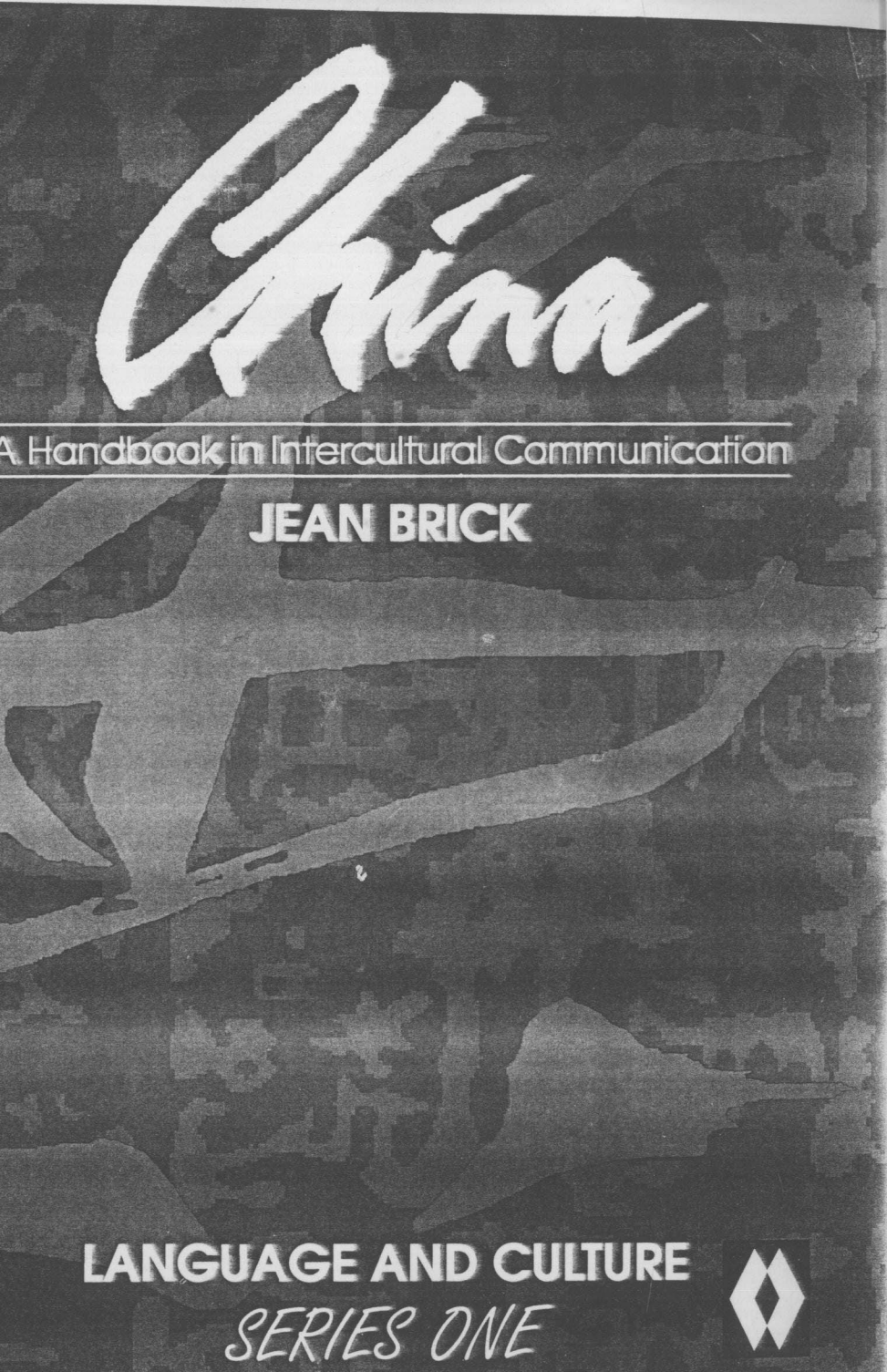
China
A Handbook in Intercultural Communication
JEAN BRICK
LANGUAGE AND CULTURE
SERIES ONE

CHINA:

A HANDBOOK IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research
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To

Mum and Dad

With Love

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CHAPTER ■ ONE

INTRODUCTION

What is Cross-cultural Communication?

Once upon a time a marmoset decided to leave the forest and explore the great, wide world. He travelled to the city and saw many strange and wonderful things but finally he decided to return home. Back in the forest, his friends and relatives crowded round. "Well," they cried, "what did you see?" "I saw buildings made of concrete and glass. Buildings so high that they touched the sky," said the marmoset. And all his friends and relatives imagined glass branches scratching the sky.

"The buildings were full of people walking on two legs and carrying briefcases," said the marmoset. And his friends and relatives could almost see the people running along the branches with their tails wrapped firmly around their briefcases.

What is Australian about an Australian? Or Chinese about a Chinese? Or German about a German? If someone is described as a dinky-di Aussie, what does it mean?

In answering such a question, we would probably point to certain ideas, certain ways of behaving, perhaps certain products that would, in general, be associated with the concept of 'an Australian'. We would, in fact, describe a culture. Members of a particular culture have certain things in common, a certain way of life, a certain way of behaviour. What they share includes certain values and beliefs, certain customs, perhaps certain gestures or certain foods. They may also share distinctive artefacts, a distinctive art, a distinctive music and a body of literature and folk stories.

This way of regarding culture as observable patterns of behaviour is a useful one but one that has its limitations. One question that tends to remain unanswered is what leads members of a particular culture to agree that certain behaviours have certain meanings. For example, how does an Australian man know that when another man approaches him in a pub, slaps him on the back and says "How ya goin' you ol' bastard", he is expressing friendship and intimacy!

Members of a culture share patterns of behaviour, but they also share models of how the world works and how its myriad aspects relate to each other. These models are crucial not only in deciding how to interpret what is going on in any given situation, but also in moulding actions and responses. In other words, culture can be seen as shared knowledge, what people need to know in order to act appropriately within a given culture.

However, it is also important to remember that a culture is not a static entity; it is constantly changing, constantly evolving under the impact of events and as a result of contact with other cultures. Changes in certain aspects of a culture, especially in the area of behaviours and customs, can

occur rapidly. Changes in the underlying values, in ways of looking at the world, tend to be much slower.

Language and Culture

As children grow up, they learn how to act within their culture. They learn what actions are appropriate in a given situation, how to interpret the actions occurring around them. At the same time, they are learning to speak their first language. Language and culture are, of course, inextricably linked, so that learning language means learning culture and vice versa. For example, a child growing up in one of the English-speaking cultures learns to say "Can I have a drink?" rather than "Give me a drink"; he learns to address his brothers and sisters by their names regardless of whether they are older or younger than himself; he learns to say "thank you" when accepting something. In other words, in learning how to speak, a child must not only master the vocabulary and grammar of a certain language, he must also absorb the social rules that govern how he should use his vocabulary and grammar in concrete situations. He absorbs a world view that relates these various situations together into a meaningful whole. He learns a culture that is largely, though by no means totally, expressed through language.

However, this world view is generally not a consciously reached, consciously held world view. Just as people are often unable to describe – even on a simple level – the grammatical rules of the language they speak, so they are equally unconscious that their habit of addressing siblings by their given name (and even having a given name and a family name) arises from a way of looking at the world that has been learned, that other people from other cultures may have other world views that do not necessarily share this way of addressing siblings.

This becomes important when we realise that in moving from one culture to another, people take their world view with them. It informs their interpretation of the new situations they experience so that the interpretations they reach are frequently inappropriate. Like the marmosets, they see the world through the spectacles of their own culture. The interpretations they put on events in the new culture frequently do not match the interpretations reached by members of the new culture. An example illustrates the possible consequences:

When the first Vietnamese refugees began to arrive in Australia in 1978, many of them settled in Cabramatta, a south-western suburb of Sydney. At that time, the majority of the shops in Cabramatta were operated by Australians or by migrants who had lived in Australia for a considerable period and who had to a great extent acculturated, at least in regard to behaviour accepted in service encounters in shops. When a Vietnamese went into a shop, he would ask for what he wanted: "Give me a packet of cigarettes", "I want a kilo of pork". In Vietnamese, the direct translation of their words was totally appropriate. However, the Australian shopkeeper concluded from the lack of softeners ("Could I have ...", "Have you got ..."), and from the lack of "please" and "thank you", that the Vietnamese was rude. He therefore raised his voice

slightly and spoke a little more abruptly. The Vietnamese, observing this, concluded that, as he himself had behaved perfectly normally, the reason for this very obvious display of anger must be racism. He therefore used body language to convey his contempt for the shopkeeper ... and so on. In the end, the majority of shopkeepers were convinced that Vietnamese were arrogant and impolite, while the majority of Vietnamese were equally convinced that the shopkeepers were arrogant, impolite and racist to boot.

This type of mutually reinforcing mistaken interpretation is something that happens continually in cross-cultural encounters as each participant is guided in both his interpretation and his action and reaction by a world view that is largely reponsible for determining what should be said, where and in what way.

Culture and Language Teaching

With language and culture so inextricably linked, it is obvious that a language learner has more to do than master a new grammar and vocabulary. He must also learn what utterances are appropriate to particular situations. To state this is to state one of the fundamental principles of modern language teaching. Very few teachers would disagree that the language being taught needs to be presented in contexts mirroring as far as possible the contexts in which it occurs in everyday life. Furthermore, the language taught must be appropriate to those contexts. However, many teachers tend to be unaware of the extent to which the considerations determining appropriateness are not shared by students from different cultural backgrounds. For example, when teaching a function such as 'asking for permission', many teachers assume that once modals have been presented and practised in a specific situation, then the student should have no further trouble in asking his employer for a day off work. However, the function 'asking for permission' involves not only a form of words but also a mental construct that determines when it is appropriate to actually ask, what reasons, if any, it is appropriate to advance, and how directly or indirectly permission should be sought.

Even when teachers are aware of differences in mental constructs, this does not always usefully reflect itself in classroom practice. Most teachers are aware that differences in topic selection on first meeting may result in their Chinese students asking people's ages. They therefore warn students against this. However, by vetoing this and a number of other questions commonly asked by Chinese on first meetings, teachers effectively leave their students with nothing to say. In other words, teachers tend to teach what not to say, but not what to say.

Teaching Culture

This book is aimed at helping language teachers integrate consideration of some aspects of culture into the teaching of language. It starts from the premise that any attempt to examine cultural issues in the classroom must be on the basis of mutual exploration.

We have already seen that cultural rules tend to be unconscious, that they are acted upon rather than thought about. This means that both teachers and students may be largely unconscious of the considerations of appropriateness that govern their speech. Thus the Chinese student finds it natural to address his teacher as "Teacher Mary" while the Australian teacher finds it equally natural to be addressed as "Mary". In order to successfully integrate considerations of cultural appropriacy into language teaching, it is necessary that both teacher and students examine their own assumptions of what is natural. This mutual exploration, and the establishment of the relativity of what is considered to be natural, allows participants from both cultures to be both teachers and learners.

Having each participant in the classroom fill both teacher and learner roles has several consequences. Most importantly, it places both cultures on an equal footing. If roles are not shared it is very easy, in examining cultural differences, for judgmental attitudes to appear. "We do it this way" when coming from a teacher to students who have no opportunity of saying "... and we do it this way", may very easily be transformed into "and so you should do it this way because it is right". In dealing with cultural assumptions and cultural differences, value judgments need to be constantly guarded against.

If both teacher and students are together examining their own cultural assumptions, the danger that a culture will be reduced to a list of dos and don'ts is also minimised. This is because both students and teacher are in a position to give an insider's view of one culture. An insider's view will inevitably be richer than that of an uninformed outsider and this should largely prevent any participant in the class from approaching the other culture as if it consisted of a series of permissives and prohibitions.

In integrating culture into the language classroom, we need to recognise that the aim is not so much to 'teach' culture as to teach cross-cultural communication skills. It is not possible, within the confines of the classroom, to expose students to the full range of a culture. Nor is it possible to prepare students for all situations in which differing cultural assumptions may cause mis-communication. It is, however, possible to develop in both teacher and student an ability to identify areas of possible misunderstanding so as to avoid such mis-communication. It is also possible to develop skills allowing participants in a situation to recognise when mis-communication has occurred, to analyse its probable cause and therefore to attempt repair.

The major skills involved are the ability to suspend judgment, to analyse a situation as a native of that culture would analyse it, and choose a course of action that is most culturally appropriate to the situation.

The ability to suspend judgment, to be tolerant, is necessary for anyone hoping to avoid mis-communication. It involves the learner recognising that every culture has its own logic, its own integrity, and that no one culture is any better (or, for that matter, any worse) than any other. This does not mean that the individual is forced into a cultural relativism that prevents him ever making any judgments. The point is that when judgments are made they are made in full recognition of their cultural relativity, and that the alternative point of view is also seen to have logic and validity.

In order to appreciate this logic, it is necessary to have some understanding of how a situation appears to a native of the culture in question. This in turn involves some knowledge not only of the customs and behaviours associated with the culture, but also some understanding of the world view, the values and beliefs that inform those customs and behaviours.

Taken together, tolerance and an understanding of the major cultural assumptions of all participants in a cross-cultural interaction allow the possibility of choice in cross-cultural encounters. That is, situations can be managed or resolved according to the cultural rules most appropriate to the individual situation.

About this Book

The approach adopted in this book involves investigating, in a rather abbreviated form, aspects of Chinese behaviour, Chinese experience and Chinese values and beliefs. The aspects chosen are those that relate to the aspects of Australian language and culture commonly encountered in survival and general English courses. After discussion of the Chinese situation, tasks for Australian teachers are designed to help them analyse their own assumptions and their own reactions to situations involving cultural differences. These tasks are followed by classroom tasks which are designed to help students explore both their own and Australian cultural assumptions.

Of the task types used, the majority should be familiar, but two perhaps need some introduction. These are the case study and the survey/small-scale research project. The case study describes an authentic example of mis-communication and asks students to analyse what caused the mis-communication. They may also be asked to offer advice for dealing with the situation. There is no 'answer' provided to these case studies. It is expected that the teacher will contribute to the discussion and that the class as a whole will arrive at interpretations that are generally accepted by all.

Surveys and small-scale research projects involve observation of common Australian and Chinese behaviour. They aim to train students to observe and interpret the situations in which they find themselves; in other words, to enhance their independent learning skills.

Many of the exercises included as teachers' exercises can, in fact, also be used in the classroom; and conversely, exercises designed for classroom use can also be used by teachers interested in increasing their cross-cultural awareness.

Culture and the Individual

This book deals in generalities. It talks about 'Chinese' and about 'Australians', each as a group sharing certain ideas and certain behaviours in common. The dangers of stereotyping and of over-generalisation involved in this approach are very real. It is necessary to keep in mind that every person is both a

member of a particular culture and at the same time an individual in his or her own right. Every person interprets the culture of the group to which he or she belongs in their own particular way. The extent to which the individual conforms to the patterns of his or her own culture, and the ways in which he or she expresses them, vary from individual to individual.

Differences in class, age, sex and geographical area, to name only some variables, will affect the expression and interpretation of cultural values. No one person is the embodiment of the 'average Chinese' or the 'average Australian'.

At the same time, it is important to define just what 'Australian' and 'Chinese' mean in relation to culture in this book. By 'Australian culture' I mean the total of those behaviours and customs, values and beliefs, and ways of interpreting the world that guide the interactions of the majority of Australian residents with other Australian residents.

These behaviours, values and beliefs have an Anglo-Celtic basis but have been modified by Australian residents in response to local conditions and as a result of contact with non-Anglo-Celtic cultural groups which have also migrated to Australia. An Australian is therefore someone who, regardless of ethnic background or place of birth, is socialised in these behaviours, values and beliefs and is able to use them appropriately in both determining his own actions and interpreting the actions of others. Such a person may of course also be socialised in an alternative culture or cultures but this does not mean that he is not an Australian. Such a person has two (or more) cultural identities.

A similar definition applies to Chinese culture. In this case, the descriptions in this book are based on the behaviours, values and beliefs and the ways of interpreting the world that are regarded as appropriate by city dwellers in the People's Republic of China. While some of the descriptions in this book are applicable also to residents of Hong Kong and Taiwan, it is important to remember that previously existing regional variations and vastly different histories during the past 40 years have resulted in significant cultural differences.

Attitudes to Culture

The preceding discussion focuses on what is shared by way of behaviours, beliefs, customs and interpretations as a means of defining members of a particular culture. It is a definition that implies a measure of choice regarding cultural identity. A person can, for example, at least theoretically learn to be an Australian by adopting Australian behaviours, customs and beliefs.

This way of approaching culture may not necessarily be shared by Chinese students, many of whom may believe that being ethnically Han Chinese is a necessary part of being Chinese and belonging to Chinese culture. The results of this difference in outlook can be baldly summed up like this: Australians tend to believe that people everywhere are basically

Australian. Cultural differences are seen as superficial and that, underneath, people really behave and believe as Australians do. Newcomers are therefore expected to speak English and are expected to conform to the Australian way of life. Failure to do so can be taken as evidence of hostility.

Most Chinese, on the other hand, tend to believe that a non-Chinese is different from a Chinese in a way that is almost impossible to overcome. So people are surprised when a non-Chinese speaks fluent Chinese or when they express an appreciation for something felt to be typically Chinese. Such appreciation may be interpreted as an unusual display of friendship or solidarity while a lack of adaptation is more to be expected and not necessarily indicative of hostility.

On the part of Chinese students, this may result in a ready acceptance of the existence of cultural differences and a willingness to explore them. At the same time, however, it may result in a belief that 'cultural difference' is understood by Australians as a legitimate excuse for behaviour that does not conform to Australian expectations.

"Australians should understand us" is a commonly voiced opinion, and when it is found that Australians do not necessarily either understand or accept cultural difference as an explanation, they may feel that Australians are being unreasonable. The general acceptance of the existence of cultural differences then may actually hinder the acquisition of competence in handling instances of cross-cultural mis-communication. This is because Australians may be perceived as having a duty to understand, and such a perception may weaken any feeling of need regarding the necessity of acting in what Australians consider to be a culturally appropriate manner.

The Organisation of this Book

As this book is primarily aimed at teachers of English as a Second Language, it is assumed that students will actually be in Australia while they are studying English. In this case, many of them will be affected to a greater or lesser degree by culture shock. What culture shock is, how it manifests itself, and suggestions on how to cope with it are discussed in Chapter 2.

Chapter 3 aims at giving the teacher a brief introduction to the People's Republic, especially to its history, geography and economy. The second part of the chapter introduces some of the salient aspects of Mandarin (***Putonghua***), Mandarin being the official language of a country noted for its linguistic diversity. Brief introductions to the grammar and writing system are given, with the intention of noting major features only.

The description of aspects of Chinese culture begins with the self; firstly examining the self as it is officially defined on forms and by officialdom. The rest of the chapter looks at the ways in which the self relates to family, to friends and to members of the opposite sex.

Chapter 5 takes themes related to everyday life, themes such as employment, housing, and shopping among others, and describes the general

situation with regard to each. The focus is on differences with the Australian situation and on problems that are likely to result from these differences.

As Chapter 5 examines the Chinese background to many of the themes occurring in basic English language courses, so the following chapter looks at many of the functions that are taught in such courses. The emphasis here is not on how these functions are realised in English as opposed to Chinese but on the assumptions that underlie and determine the realisation of these functions.

The next two chapters are closely related and examine relationships and values that are crucial to an understanding of how the world appears through Chinese eyes.

The final, and perhaps the most important, chapter deals with the Chinese student. Attitudes to learning and teaching, beliefs about the role of the teacher and the role of the student, about effective ways of learning and about expectations of classroom behaviour are all discussed in the light of the themes elaborated in earlier sections of the book.

CHAPTER ■ TWO

CULTURE SHOCK

What is Culture Shock?

When a person moves from one culture to another, he suddenly finds that much of what he has learned about interpreting the actions of people around him is suddenly irrelevant. He finds that the strategies he has used to influence people or events in certain ways are no longer effective, the assumptions that guided his understandings and reactions are no longer reliable. Even distinguishing between the significant and the insignificant in a given situation becomes difficult, if not impossible.

This sudden psychological transition from competent adult to ineffective child inevitably results in the serious erosion of the individual's feelings of self-worth. He experiences feelings of disorientation, frustration and helplessness. In short, he experiences culture shock.

Culture shock is the result of the removal of the familiar. Suddenly the individual is faced with the necessity of working, commuting, studying, eating, shopping, relaxing, even sleeping, in an unfamiliar environment organised according to unknown rules. In mild form, culture shock manifests itself in symptoms of fatigue, irritability and impatience. Being unable to interpret the situations in which they find themselves, people often believe they are being deliberately deceived or exploited by host-country nationals. They tend to perceive rudeness where none is intended. Their efficiency and flexibility is often impaired and both work and family suffer. Some people may respond by developing negative stereotypes of the host culture, by withdrawing as much as possible from contact with host-country nationals, by refusing to learn the language and by mixing exclusively with people of their own cultural background. In extreme cases, rejection may be so complete that the individual returns immediately to their own culture, regardless of the cost in social, economic or personal terms. Alternatively, people may retreat into their own private world, either mentally or physically.

Physical symptoms of culture shock may include headaches, stomach-aches, diarrhoea, constant fatigue, difficulty in sleeping or excessive sleep and a general feeling of malaise. Unfortunately, many doctors are unfamiliar with culture shock and attempt to treat the symptoms rather than the cause.

The important thing to recognise about culture shock is that it is universal. It is experienced to a greater or lesser degree by all those who move from one culture to another. Experiencing culture shock does not mean that an individual is inflexible or unadaptable. It does mean that recognition of its virtual inevitability can lead to the development of steps to reduce its impact. The ways in which people adapt to unfamiliar cultures and the steps that can be taken to accelerate this process and reduce the severity of culture shock will be discussed below.

Have you ever lived for an extended period of time, say six months or longer, in another culture?

Which aspects of the experience did you find most pleasant and rewarding?

Which aspects of the foreign culture were most difficult to adapt to?

How did you yourself cope with culture shock?

If you have not yourself experienced living in a foreign culture, talk to someone who has. Ask them the above questions.

To what extent do you think your students are suffering from culture shock?

Have you noticed any behaviour that might be explained in terms of culture shock?

How far and in what ways do you think that a teacher can help students cope with culture shock?

Experiencing Culture Shock

We have made the point above that culture shock is universal and virtually inevitable. This is not to say that it takes the same form in each and every individual. What does appear to happen is that most people go through a similar sequence of stages but that both the intensity of the experience and the time taken to go through each phase varies enormously from individual to individual.

In general, people go through four stages in the process of adaptation. The first stage, which is often very short, is the stage of euphoria. Everything seems fascinating. To the Chinese student, for example, Sydney is a wonderland. The streets are so quiet and clean, the office blocks in the city centre so modern, so developed. Similarly, the Australian in Beijing delights in the bicycles and the bustle, in the overwhelming sense of history and the survival of tradition.